

# What Does The South Want?

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**I**t is a public impression that Southerners do not have inhibitions against speaking up and that what they like to speak about is the South. They now seem to concede that the South is a member part of an organic Union and that in this relation will come what future happiness may be in store for the section. They begin to speak more importantly, or so it sounds, more prophetically, about what the South proposes to be and to do. But they speak with many voices, so that a listener is bewildered, and asks, What constitutes a proper spokesman? and, Which is the real South?

I cannot answer these questions; or rather, I cannot demonstrate that the answers I should like to offer are the correct ones: so various are the attitudes taken by Southerners toward Southern history, so various the views held about Southern policy, and so uncertain the future. The unitary South has passed; not even in a bare electoral sense is the South solid anymore. The unitary South has been gradually disintegrating ever since Reconstruction days. In war, the South lost her army by attrition. In peace, when the political defenses were down, there has been another process at work: the gradual uneven insistent penetration of the region by foreign ideas.

Consider the contiguous States of Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. They were, respectively, the last, the penultimate, and the antepenultimate States to join the Confederacy. The first two had considerable Unionist populations. All three were mindful that, in the event of war, the position of a border State would be uncomfortable. (North Carolina would be a border State if Virginia did not come in.) But all joined. The war was fought principally in Virginia and Tennessee, as was bound to be, and North Carolina was spared the presence of armies on her soil, but, as if in compensation, gave more soldiers to the Confederacy than any other State. And today? No State is quite identifiable with a doctrine, or policy, since each State contains within itself all the doctrines. But a little may be said toward a distinction. Virginia, of all States in the Union, probably the most conscious of her history, has a highly ambiguous present position. Virginia's policy, so far as one may be predicated, is unrelated to Virginia's history. The history, aggressively,

self-consciously Southern; and the policy? I only know that important Virginians say, "Virginia really has more Eastern affiliations than Southern ones; we are not exactly one of your regular Southern States." Which means to me, to the extent that this is official Virginian talk and feeling, that Virginia is bidding for a place in the imperial Eastern Big-Business economy. And as for North Carolina, there is the fact that the Piedmont region is visibly industrialized far beyond other Southern regions, and is less distinctively Southern. In North Carolina, they have had their Walter Hines Page, and they have their excellent University filled with modernists.

In Tennessee, there are certainly many persons who agree with the Virginia and Carolina modernists. In 1929, the biggest and most high-powered promoters in the whole South—or at least the ones that made the biggest crash—had their headquarters in Nashville. But in Nashville also was the nucleus of the so-called Agrarian group. The movement which these last initiated was not measurably a very large one, yet surprisingly it seemed to engage the public imagination as the counter-attack, or the belated offensive, of the old or traditional South. But for the probability that it would be reading too fateful a history into the event, I should say that it was as if the State had essayed to assume a leadership that was not coveted by her elders. Not by Virginia, who is oldest, nor by North Carolina, who is the mother of Tennessee. The assumption would miss being a presumption because the leadership was going by default.

Hitherto the Agrarians have addressed themselves principally to their fellow Southerners, with the result that they have sometimes been fairly unintelligible to readers from other sections. But really, it must be supposed that they would welcome all reasonable affiliations, and indeed seek them if they knew how. After all, the Agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand* were mostly college professors, with no more gift for public life than was to be expected. They were delighted to discover some unforeseen friends; as, among New Englanders who have seen land and power pass from the original possession into strange hands and strange uses; and among Westerners and Middle-Westerners who have never known their real interests to be pursued by their nominal patrons who controlled things in New York and Washington. The Southern Agrarians would like to see all these sympathetic elements combined, for the sake of power; that is, for the sake of common protection, and the preservation of American institutions. America has been dominated, financially, industrially, and politically, from the East. Behind this dominion, there was no idyllic purpose ever pretended, but there was the promise that it would make all Americans rich, and "civilize" them in the hard materialistic

modern style. It made many Americans richer, indeed, and then its magical power suddenly failed, and even the favored Americans became very much poorer. The Eastern idea is not working perfectly. There must be as many persons begrudged against the imposed economy as there are persons who still feel easy and hopeful under its grandiose ministrations.

The South has a body of prejudices—I think that is the precise name for them—which are yet far from dead. They have to do with the way to live, and the way to conduct business. These prejudices do not consist with the recent economic doctrines, but they do consist with the new skepticism and discontent. In other words, the South, by virtue of being moved by a tradition, is capable of bringing passion to the support of a policy which other regions begin to come to by rational and somewhat distrusted processes. That is why, as I hope, the South may be a valuable accession to the scattering and unorganized party of all those who think it is time to turn away from the frenzy of Big Business toward something older, more American, and more profitable.

I shall try to calculate what sort of economic establishment the South would approve most naturally, in the light of these prejudices. If the Agrarians have in the past had most to say about an economy for farmers, there are also just as instant prepossessions in the South in the matter of the right economy for the other estates. There are business men and laborers, as well as farmers, equally to be defended. I shall refer to each class in turn.

## II

An orthodox capitalism for the South would be an economy with a wide distribution of the tangible capital properties. That is the thing with which the South is best acquainted. The business transacted under it is business on the small scale—many owners, little businesses. The philosophy behind it I will argue briefly as a philosophy which most plain Southerners would understand.

Ownership of property is one of the best privileges and one of the most sobering responsibilities that citizens can have under a free State. It is all but an indispensable qualification for the complete exercise of citizenship. But I refer to that kind of property which the owner administers, not to a paper ownership which does not entail any part in the management. The fathers of the nation were at pains to write into the Constitution the inviolability of the person, and then at pains to write into it the inviolability of property; of property in the sense I have said, which

was nearly the only sense of it they had. These are the principles of original Americanism, North and South. Because of them, the Constitution may still be regarded as an instrument worth fighting for, provided it can be held to its intention. The Southern heresy, as many “advanced” or “liberal” thinkers regard it, lies in the constitutionalistic bias of the region.

With the advent of the modern economy, however, the little businesses merge into the large business, and the fact of property takes on a new meaning; a meaning very much poorer in content and encouraging some vicious propensities. For we have to ask, What becomes of the original small owners, those responsible and therefore ideal citizens, in the age of Big Business?

They may become employees in Big Business. But in that event, they lose their economic freedom, for they become hired men, though they wear white collars, taking orders. The bigger and more efficient the business, the more meticulous the orders. Under Big Business, the real economic initiative rests upon a few choice heads, which may be very strong heads, indeed; it is these who lay out the program for the others. The owners of all the other heads cannot find a first-rate occupation for them and do not become the better men for it, though they may enjoy an increased productivity.

Or, as an alternative, they may become paper owners in the large business; but if this is their only function in the public economy, it is a strange one. It involves no responsibility, or one so slight and indirect that it does not seem worth trying to exercise. Among the incidents in the growth of the scale of business organization—which defines somewhat the development of the modern economy—is the increase in the fluidity of capital, which means that there is more and more of free capital to hire out at interest for purposes with which the owner has no concern, and possibly very little acquaintance.

Is it necessary to persuade Americans to guard the right to administer their own property? We are singularly enfeebled if we now resent the thought of such a bother. Yet our economic “progress” brings the steady increase of a class of persons who might be defined as economic geldings; they are the *rentiers*, or the investors. The bad reputation which once attached to the usurers when usury was nothing but interest was born of the plain man's notion that the lender of money, dissociating himself from the pains and pleasures of capital production, was dodging his responsibilities, and really was too deficient to relish the taste of them.

Many of the ablest men of this country, however, as judged either by heredity or by education, have been gelded. In the South, too, they are to be found, often the

handsome and charming members of the old families. They would define their economic occupation as “watching the market,” meaning the fluctuations of security prices on Wall Street. Their technical ownership in a company does not imply an interest in its actual business problems. If it gets into trouble, they are far from feeling any proprietary concern. They telephone their brokers to sell.

Who, then, runs the Big Businesses? The executives, the officers, the directors, a small company of men, all in the position of trustees for the invisible and putatively brainless owners. Assume that they are honest trustees, as they probably are. What is honesty in a trustee? The virtue of a business executive is like that of a statesman, it consists in getting all he can for his wards. The standard of international morality is lower than the standard of personal morality, and the code of Big Business is lower than that of little business. The most charming statesmen are prepared to tell lies and break treaties and wage unjust wars in the name of their country, and amiable gentlemen, on becoming business executives, proceed to cut the throats of their small competitors and hire labor for the company on terms that sacrifice the dignity and elemental needs of the laborers. We have been informed that the “economic man,” who used to be cited by economic theorists as the man who acts strictly in the pursuit of gain and is immune to moral and personal considerations, was an abstraction that never existed. He does not exist in the small businesses, or at least he is hard to find there, but he is the regular thing in Big Business. The true economic man is the corporation, whose multitude of owners enjoy limited liability and leave the business to agents to run with maximum efficiency; Under Big Business and limited liability, the spirit of *noblesse oblige* has disappeared from the working habits of the rulers of society. If it remains somewhere within consciousness, it ceases to apply at the place where it would do the most good, for in the economic world, a technique has been devised which will prevent it from having any effect.

These are human and moralistic scruples, it must be conceded. But by a coincidence, the associated doctrines of Big Business, mass production, and maximum efficiency begin to encounter suspicion from the pure economists, I shall not attempt to reproduce their arguments. They observe:

1. That the superior productivity claimed for Big Business seems to have been overestimated, and to be by no means the invariable rule. At the least, a very expert analysis is demanded. And it is certain that the destruction of little businesses by Big Business does not always prove the latter's superior economy, for often it

means that the superior capital of the corporate business has been used to advantage in unfair trade practices.

2. The superior efficiency of Big Business may be clearly demonstrable, by beautiful statistical exhibits, and by theory of mathematical cogency, and still, it seems to be a question whether Big Business does not head inevitably for the graveyard. There is the strange phenomenon of 1929-32 to its credit. There is the contemporary and even stranger phenomenon of "rapid recovery" without serious diminution of unemployment. Of what use is a brilliant system that cannot keep on its feet?

Now there is practically nobody, even in the economically backward South, who proposes to destroy corporate business. Least of all, it may be, in the South, which wants to see its industries developed, so that it may be permitted to approach closer to regional autonomy. Corporate business is essential to the production of many things that we demand, it is institutionalized in our economy. But every day or so, it seems to Southerners, when they reflect upon it, to have exceeded its limits and become predatory. It preys on the little independents. But it is peculiarly vulnerable to attack because it is primarily, and will very largely remain, an Eastern instrument, preying on the West and South. Here is the modern sectionalism that makes inflammable tempers take fire. The South is perhaps more sensitive to that kind of piracy than the West, but perhaps the West will be glad to have a Southern alliance as soon as it sees how opposed to its own interests are the Eastern business interests, and how impossible it is to bring the Eastern interests to terms by the exercise of nominal membership in a ruthlessly Eastern political party. It seems to me certain that coming economic issues will array section against section very openly.

Specifically, I should think that the South, when it has a definite program which is consistent with its customary attitudes, will make at least two major requirements toward the recovery of responsible business direction: a review of the easy bargain which the charter-granting power now makes with the absentee owners of capital properties; and every possible legal assurance to the small independents of their right to compete against the corporations without being exposed to conspiracies.

### III.

And now the farmers. Farming has remained a private business; the joint-stock companies engaged in agriculture in this country are as exceptional as their economy is doubtful. Farmers are far ahead of the so-called businessmen in the unanimity of their independence. Even the tenant farmer takes his contract on broad terms which leave him free to plant, tend, gather, and sometimes sell at his own discretion; and even the day laborer submits to nothing like the bossing of a factory foreman. Farmers are much the most important bloc of free spirits who have survived the modern economy. They should be regarded as the staple of our citizenship.

Yet with respect to pecuniary reward, farming is a miserable business, in the South as elsewhere. The conclusion is forced upon the realistic observer that agriculture in this country is not an ordinary business, but one that suffers from an immense and peculiar disability. Agrarians take the realistic view and propose the following theory.

In the modern "efficient" society, business is highly specialized, and both owners and laborers live by the money income which they net from the sale of their special goods and services. But agriculture, pursued on strictly business principles, will always be insolvent, and the class dependent on it will always have an insufficient income.

The reason for this is that agriculture is an over-capitalized business, therefore an over-productive business, and therefore an unprofitable one. Its capital is the land, which is fixed by nature, and which is greatly in excess of our needs. How much in excess, it is impossible to say. The land is several times too abundant, at least; under the circumstances, it will never attain anything like its maximum productivity, so that we shall never know how great that is. Yet practically all of this land is in business; that is, in the hands of private owners waiting to produce. These owners will raise crops for the market as fast as they see any chance to dispose of them at cost, and as a matter of fact, always a little faster. In the same way, the railroads, or the cotton textile mills, must cease to prosper if there is a marked excess of fixed capital engaged in the competition. But the doom of agriculture is really worse, for it is perpetual. The supernumerary railroad equipment or mills might be abandoned, or scrapped. The land cannot be destroyed, and it cannot even come out of the hands of private owners until the present Constitution ceases to govern the American society.

But light is shed upon the special position of agriculture as soon as we ask the question, How, then, do the farmers remain upon the land when they are by

definition, bankrupt and destitute? They do it by virtue of the fact that they practice not one but two economies. The one to which I have been referring is the money economy, in which farmers as a class would certainly fail if they had no other recourse, but the other is the individual economy of self-subsistence, upon which farmers can always fall back and by virtue of which farmers are invincible.

The mistake which farmers in America have made is in having been taken in by the brilliant (if wayward) spectacle of the business or money economy, so that they concluded to rely on money-farming alone; they were betrayed into this decision by unrealistic advisers, including for the most part their instructors in the agricultural schools and experiment stations. It is not by money-farming that farmers can hold their property and live in decent comfort: it is by the combination of subsistence-farming and money-farming. This was the burden of what the Agrarians had to say to farmers, and I shall not enlarge upon it.

The special position of agriculture in America presents these features, therefore: Liability, a natural and permanent capitalization which is grievously excessive, and which makes it impossible for it to survive as a pure money-making business; assets, first the privacy and independence which attaches to its pursuit, and second, the unique advantage of subsistence without regard to money income.

But something must be said as to income, and the things that income and nothing but income will secure to farmers. (They will not live by bread alone, nor even by bacon, dairy products, and garden truck.) At this writing, the Triple A device for enhancing farmers' income by arbitrary subsidy has been ruled out by the Supreme Court. That is well. Much as the farmers need money, it is too precarious to depend on receiving it in the form of a bounty, and it does not help their morale. Still worse, they cannot submit to government control as the condition of receiving it; farming ceases to be farming when its direction becomes external and involuntary; and farmers would have eventually rebelled against A.A.A. in the name of their constitutional rights if the processors had not anticipated them.

It seems idle also to expect much of increased foreign trade as a means of disposing of surplus. The world evidently does not need additional exports of American farm products, and economic nationalism is certainly the only logical status which a country may look forward to when it does not need imports. Even the Southern cotton farmers, who look to the foreign markets as no other farmers do, begin to be pessimistic about relief from this source and to consider other uses for their cotton acreage.



But in view of the special liability of agriculture in this country, and the fact that farmers are a class whom the nation should delight to honor, there should be a special treatment for them. It should take the form of basic yet indirect bounties, which would give them the advantages needed for the exercise of good citizenship: government services. The farmer should receive greater and not lesser services than he now receives, and yet he should be relieved entirely or nearly of his present land taxes; for these are not paid with produce, but with income from the land, and the income from the land does not justify them.

Among these services must be listed good roads. Another will be a free domestic market on which he can buy with his limited income at competitive prices, and not, as at present, at prices fixed by business combinations. Another will be first-class educational advantages for his children; it is the lack of these which has driven many of the best farmers from the land. They should not have to leave the land for that reason; the farmers of the poor Scandinavian countries have not had to do it.

A not unimportant service would consist in electricity delivered cheap at his door. It is possible that the name of the thirty-second President will go down into history as associated with this philanthropy. It is electricity which makes most of the difference between the comforts of the city and the comforts of the country, and yet no commodity is more negotiable. The Agrarians have been rather belabored both in the South and out of it by persons who have understood them as denying bathtubs to the Southern rural population. But I believe they are fully prepared to concede the bathtubs.

#### IV

The South cannot view human labor in the classical economic sense, as a commodity, or a cost. Labor is men laboring. The men who labor are, on the whole, those who are backward in economic initiative and intelligence; more rarely, those who have a sort of apprenticeship to serve, who lack nothing but economic opportunity and experience. But they are men, and if they are too helpless or too docile to defend their human dignity, they must be assisted.

The indignities of modern mechanized labor are marks of slavishness, not freedom; they affect principally the spirit, then incidentally the body, and the purse. But the cure which the passionate partisans of labor generally propose is an odd one. They would destroy the freedom of the owners in order to bring about the propertyless State in which nobody is to be free. Before that stage is reached, they

suppose that bigger wages, or a larger share in the spoils of production, is all the compensation for servility that can be thought of; or that it does not really matter how the laborer has to labor if it enables him to ride in a car after working hours.

In the South, I believe it is generally assumed that there will always be the men whose courage and intelligence entitle them to own, and also the men whose natural quality fits them to work for hire. Otherwise, the ordinary pattern of economic society is not possible, or at least it is criminally wrong, and we must find a new one; though it is very likely that the present large scale of wage slavery misrepresents the actual proportion of this latter class in our society. In opposition to this assumption, the writers of recent proletarian literature have grown irrational and a little maudlin in their glorification of the workingman. They are mystical. They have broken bread with laborers and communed with them over their beers. They have liked the thrilling odors from the armpits of men who work with their hands, and they have admired the ox-like strength of laborers, and still more, the ox-like herding together in comradeship, and in the gregariousness of simple creatures, they have seen the sublime consummation of human society. The generosity of this policy is beyond praise. But by an oversight, they have forgotten to make room for the most distinguishing of the human qualities, which is—intelligence.

Such realistic expressions as these may not seem to promise much for labor; they hardly compare with those of the left-wing authors for quixotism. On the other side, I shall try to imagine some of the advantages which the South may want to realize for its labor population as its new industrial establishment rears itself. But there is first one more reservation to make, for the sake of honesty. The income receivable by wage-earners is like that receivable by farmers: it must depend more on economic forces than on legislation. Nevertheless, there are minimum advantages which laborers as citizens should enjoy. It should be possible, by a combination of law, public opinion, and labor union policy, to improve the conditions of labor almost beyond recognition. (On this subject, I can speak only as an amateur, but perhaps I can qualify in one respect that is important—perhaps I can represent faithfully what the Southern attitude commonly is.)

The tenure of the job should be secure; that is, if the job fails, there should be a fresh source of income, a fund in reserve, to fall back upon. In other words, the South is entirely sympathetic with our incipient national and State program in this direction.

The houses and premises, so far as they are provided by the company, and perhaps with the assistance of the State and the community, should be brought up to a standard of decent habitableness. The houses should have plumbing; and what is even more important, a minimum of room, both indoors and out, which means privacy, which means personal dignity to the inhabitants. The section should be paved, planted in trees and flowers, provided with playgrounds and parks, and such other advantages as are urged nowadays by welfare workers. But I should be a little wary of the professional welfare workers, and not let them drill the population too hard in playhabits and social functions. I should give the labor community its rights and let it make the most of them. There must be adequate medical and hospital services and provision for good education.

Finally, the labor itself should not be more monstrous than the nature of the machine positively requires it to be. The principal relief from the absurd monotony of some forms of machine-tending must consist in stopping frequently, and the labor should not be performed at the fastest possible pace in the first instance. Here the Southern temperament discloses a peculiarity which sets the region quite apart from others as a field for industry. Southern labor will not work as fast as other labor. It is even a matter of pride to the laborers; I have heard manufacturers discuss it. But it is not the orthodox and approved direction for laborers, pride to take. Generally, it is the efficiency of American labor which is the matter of pride; which is boasted about by the companies, who are naturally well disposed to it, until it is taken up by the laborers, and eventually becomes the official boast of the American Federation of Labor. American labor works faster than British labor, but I believe it is exceeded now in this respect by Japanese labor; and the Japanese, in turn, are excelled by the red ants, who probably are proud of knowing how to run without ever having learned how to walk.

Is the tempo of Southern labor to adapt itself to that of Eastern labor, or is it to become the new standard of American labor generally? I hope the latter. Otherwise, the term "labor-saving" refers to labor in its old invidious sense, as meaning nothing more than one of the costs in production.